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KINSHASA PLEASE PASS TO BRAZZAVILLE

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [CI](#)

SUBJECT: COTE D'IVOIRE: FRENCH FORCES CONFRONT IVOIRIAN
MILITARY IN THE WILD WEST

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR JIM WOJTASIEWICZ FOR REASONS 1.4 B A
ND D.

11. (U) Most newspapers reported March 3 the French Defense Minister's official letter of protest to UN Secretary General Kofi Annan regarding recent incursions of Ivoirian military forces into the Zone of Confidence (ZC) separating the government-controlled south from the rebel-controlled north. Minister Michele Alliot-Marie's letter states that Ivoirian forces not only violated Security Council resolutions by entering the Confidence Zone, but committed what she called repeated acts of aggression against French soldiers and their property.

12. (C) According to several newspapers, soldiers from the Armed Forces of Cote d'Ivoire (FANCI) entered the ZC on three separate occasions February 26-28. The incidents occurred in and around the village of Bouenue, located near the town of Zouan-Hounien. After the second incursion, French forces apprehended several Ivoirian military and returned them to Zouan-Hounien. When they reached Zouan-Hounien the French soldiers were taken in for questioning at the local prefecture where, according to a French army spokesman, they were "insulted, spat upon and given death threats as Ivoirian soldiers videotaped the scene." FANCI troops then reportedly beat 45 villagers in Bouenue for allowing French troops to set up camp in an abandoned school building. An official from the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Assistance (OCHA) told us that there were unconfirmed reports of local pro-government militia groups gathering in the area to support FANCI in a planned attack against troops of the rebel New Forces (FN) in Danane (just north of the ZC). He believes the FANCI troops beat the locals because they were suspected of revealing FANCI's plans to the French. A local NGO with offices in the region reported that on the night of February 27, French troops had completely closed the road between Zouhan Hounien and Danane, to both vehicles and pedestrians, amid rumors that pro-government militia groups were amassing in Zouhan Hounien.

13. (C) Comment. The incidents in Zouhan Hounien and Bouenue came only a few days after French forces exchanged gunfire with individuals who they caught robbing travelers on a stretch of road within the ZC. In that incident, French forces managed to apprehend one individual, who turned out to be a member of FANCI. The subsequent apparent provocations by FANCI could well have been in retaliation for this incident. However, taken together, the series of events are a worrying sign that government military forces and pro-government militias could be taking advantage of the fact that UN peacekeeping forces abandoned their positions in the west in mid-January to push further into the ZC. End Comment.

